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### Getting involved in plan-making

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# **Getting involved in plan-making: participation in neighbourhood planning in England**

## **Abstract**

Neighbourhood planning, introduced through the Localism Act 2011, was intended to provide communities in England with new opportunities to plan and manage development. All communities were presented as being readily able to participate in this new regime with Ministers declaring it perfectly conceived to encourage greater involvement from a wider range of people. Set against such claims, whilst addressing significant gaps in the evidence, this paper provides a critical review of participation in neighbourhood planning, supported by original empirical evidence drawn from case study research. It does so at an interesting time as the community, and/or neighbourhood, appears across political parties as a preferred scalar focus for planning. Challenging Ministers' assertions, whilst mirroring past experiments in community planning, participation is found to be modest and partial, concentrated amongst a few, relatively advantaged communities, and relatively advantaged interests within those communities. The paper considers the implications for future planning policy and practice.

## **Introduction**

Introduced through the Localism Act 2011 (the Act), neighbourhood planning was intended to afford communities in England with new opportunities to plan and manage development. Said to place "an unprecedented level of influence and power at a very local level" it would offer "a scope of self-determination unheard of until now" (Clarke, 2010a). Located in Government's decentralisation and localism agenda (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2013), and forming part of its 'Big Society' project (Bailey and Pill, 2011), which positions individuals and communities, rather than the State, as the leading force for progress

(Conservative Party, 2010a), it was presented as an aspect and manifestation of a 'localist turn' (Evans et al., 2013) in government and governance. All areas and individuals were identified as being readily able to participate in the new regime, with the then Minister for Decentralisation and Planning reporting that all those who wanted to would be enabled to draw up a neighbourhood plan no matter where they lived (Clarke, 2010a). On the inclusiveness of neighbourhood planning, the Minister commented:

*“The stereotype goes that planning is the preserve of the sharp-elbowed middle classes. Now from my experience as a councillor I don't think that's accurate or fair. But I accept that authorities may see the same familiar faces commenting on numerous issues, while others decline to take part. Neighbourhood planning is perfectly conceived to encourage greater involvement and from a wider range of people”* (Clarke, 2011a).

Set against this background, the paper presents a critical review of participation in neighbourhood planning, supported by original empirical evidence drawn from case study research. In doing so, it develops understanding of a recently introduced aspect of planning (Ludwig and Ludwig, 2014), addressing critical gaps in the evidence at an interesting time as various political parties appear united in support for sub-local participatory planning projects (see Conservative Party, 2015; Blackman-Woods, 2014; UK Independence Party, 2015; Liberal Democrats, 2015; Green Party, 2015). Anchored by the critical issue of participation (Baker et al. 2010), the paper explores the possible implications of rescaling planning to the sub-local. Additionally, by engaging with England's most recent interpretation of collaborative planning (Conservative Party, 2010b), the paper connects to debates about the contents of this approach (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998) and its potential to

support wider participation (Tewdwr-Jones and Thomas, 1998), although a systematic exposition of collaborative planning is not the intent (for such accounts see Healey 1992, 1996, 1997, 2003, 2006). Lastly, it links to discussions about the potential for state-enabled neighbourhood-level initiatives to ‘empower’ local areas (Bailey and Pill, 2015; Parker and Street, 2015). Two intentionally broad questions guide the paper: who is taking part in neighbourhood planning, and what, if any, are the barriers to participation?

To provide relevant context, the next two sections explain neighbourhood planning as introduced by the coalition Government, and consider the ‘localist turn’ (Evans et al., 2013) in the English planning system under this administration. The current, limited, findings on participation in neighbourhood planning are reviewed. An exhaustive chronology of public involvement in planning is avoided with this subject thought comprehensively addressed elsewhere (see Lane, 2005, Baker et al. 2007, Carpenter and Brownill, 2008). Likewise, whilst neighbourhood planning is certainly not England’s first iteration of community-level participatory planning, to maintain a focused narrative the paper avoids cataloguing its many antecedents. For some such precedents see Gallent et al. (2008) and Bishop (2010) on parish plans, Owen (2002) on village design statements, Allmendinger and Haughton (2009, 2010) on the reworking of the scales of statutory planning and the creation of new planning spaces under New Labour and, also under this administration, Lawless (2004) and Foley and Martin (2000) on public-private-community partnerships in neighbourhood initiatives. The case study, research methodology and findings follow. A postscript covers recent events in neighbourhood planning within the case study area. A final discussion and conclusion section reflects on the potential implications for planning.

## **Neighbourhood planning and the (latest) ‘localist turn’ in the English planning system**

Entering office in 2010, the coalition Government, formed by the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, argued that it was both an intrinsic and instrumental good to devolve 'power' to communities across various public services. Adopting a neo-liberal justification, and echoing New Labour rhetoric (Gallent et al., 2013; Lord and Tewdwr-Jones, 2012), these parties identified top-down, 'big government' as a failed, outdated relic and 'localism' as the bright new future (Evans et al., 2013).

In the planning arena, the abolition of regional spatial planning, the introduction of such initiatives as community right to build and, of interest here, the launch of neighbourhood planning, were positioned as expressions and components of a new localist turn where 'the local' was understood as the idealised site for the delivery of planning (Lord and Tewdwr-Jones, 2012, page 347). The structure, content and aims of these and associated initiatives suggest the structure and content of localism as conceived by this administration. An emphasis on a majoritarian form of participatory democracy (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012) and the role of the community in local service delivery (Evans et al., 2013) formed perceived components, as did the identification of communities, citizens and other non-state bodies as capable, creative actors, the devolution of responsibilities rather than power or resources and the principle that 'community' exists, it does not need to be created (Stoker, 2012). Of note, alongside this 'new, new localism', following on from New Labour's 'new localism' (Haughton and Allmendinger, 2013), commentators identified a countervailing *centralising* policy agenda (Jones and Stewart, 2012; Ludwig and Ludwig, 2014; Stanton, 2014), as they had within New Labour's policies and programmes (Brooks, 2000; Geddes and Martin, 2000; Allen, 2006).

To focus now on neighbourhood planning, when introduced by the Conservatives (2010b) this ‘new’ regime was identified as a form of *collaborative planning*. The accuracy of this description is considered here with neighbourhood planning used as a lens through which to view and examine aspects of the collaborative approach. Defining collaborative methods as actively involving citizens in the kind of decisions previously reserved for elected members and bureaucrats, the Conservatives (2010b) claimed these techniques were ideally suited to local planning arguing that they were the best mechanism for identifying a truly local vision for an area and for bringing communities together to solve their collective problems (Conservative Party, 2010b). Such concerns for opening up decision making processes to a wider range of interests constitutes, perhaps, *the* central aim of collaborative planning (Healey, 2006).

Ministers presented neighbourhood planning as a salve for certain perceived social, political, environmental, economic, structural and procedural ailments. It would, for example, bring about a less adversarial planning system (Clark, 2010b), with conflict conceived in wholly negative terms (Allmendinger and Houghton, 2012), an orientation finding expression in collaborative planning where consensus-building is prized (Innes and Booher, 1999). Indeed, for Healey (1996, page 230), the collaborative approach can be viewed as a “process of facilitating community collaboration in the construction of strategic discourse, in *strategic consensus-building*” (emphasis added). Further, it was suggested that by devolving ‘power’ to local areas, neighbourhood planning would deliver better quality development more in line with people’s wishes and, set against a growing imbalance between supply and demand in the housing market, generate new pro-growth sentiments in local communities (Clarke, 2010b, 2011b, 2011c; Conservative Party, 2010b).

Turning to the practicalities, neighbourhood planning affords communities in England with the opportunity to initiate a process that might result in the production of a Neighbourhood Development Plan (a local land use strategy), or Neighbourhood Development Order (a tool which automatically grants planning permission for the classes of development it specifies), for a designated 'neighbourhood area'. To date, interest has been greatest in the former. Only some 4% of areas selected by government to pilot neighbourhood planning opted to pursue Neighbourhood Development Orders or, similar in nature, Local Development Orders (DCLG, 2012a). Here, the term 'neighbourhood plan' is used to refer to either document, unless otherwise stated. Neighbourhood planning comprises, then, a discrete process leading to substantive, prescribed outputs, principally concerned with land-use regulation. Although acknowledging diversity in the collaborative approach (Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 2002), it is debateable whether an equivalent concern for predetermined outputs and land-use regulation can be located in collaborative planning (Allmendinger, 2001; Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998; Healey, 1992, 2003).

Only within designated 'neighbourhood areas' can neighbourhood plans be developed. Within these areas, plans can only be prepared by parish and town councils or, where these bodies are absent (i.e. in non-parished areas), 'neighbourhood forums' (see later). Once prepared, the plan is submitted for independent examination and, subsequently, to a local referendum. At the referendum, if it secures over 50% of the vote it must be adopted by the local planning authority and becomes part of the statutory development plan. At this crucial stage of the plan-making process, then, decisions are reached through voting. Collaborative planning, however, requires that decisions are reached through consensus-building (Healey, 2006; Innes and Booher, 1999). Presupposing interaction occurs between "diverse, fluid and overlapping discourse communities", all advancing "competing claims for

action” (Healey, 1992, page 154-155), the collaborative approach assumes that consensus is both possible and desirable.

Neighbourhood plans must correspond to national planning policy, be in general conformity with local strategic planning policy and comply with EU regulations and human rights requirements. They cannot address certain ‘excluded development’ with examples including development that would breach thresholds for EU Directives, nationally significant infrastructure projects and large housing schemes (DCLG, 2011a). Importantly, plans cannot be a bar to development. They cannot identify a lower level of development than that specified within local strategic planning policy (DCLG, 2011a). Departing from collaborative planning’s concern for flexibility and choice (Healey, 2006), collectively these requirements structure the scope and content of neighbourhood plans shaping the policies they can, and should, contain (Ludwig and Ludwig, 2014). Against this background, some have questioned the extent to which neighbourhood planning enables communities to develop the kind of plans they may most favour (Bailey and Pill, 2015; Stanton, 2014) and the degree to which they are able to craft truly, and distinctively, local policies (Stanton, 2014); a ‘doubling up’ of strategic policy may be all that is possible.

Areas may benefit financially from the production of a neighbourhood plan. Communities with an adopted plan may retain 25% of any Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) raised on local development (DCLG, 2013). Through the CIL local authorities can raise funds from developers to spend on infrastructure needed because of new development. Areas without neighbourhood plans may only retain 15% of these funds (DCLG, 2013). In areas with a parish, town or community council, CIL funds are passed on to these bodies. In other areas, the local authority retains the funds and consults with the local community to



determine spending priorities (DCLG, 2014). Creating plans that promote housing development may also bring financial rewards. Through the New Homes Bonus government matches the Council Tax raised on each new home built for six years (DCLG, 2011b). Paid as an unringfenced grant, government expects local authorities to work with local communities, particularly those most affected by housing growth, to identify spending priorities (DCLG, 2011b).

Arguably departing from collaborative planning's interest in "levelling down" the planner's role "to that of any other stakeholder" (Allmendinger, 2001, page 134), and its wish to "play games with a minimum of domination" (Flyvberg, 1996, page 391), local planning authorities have several crucial roles and consequently much power in neighbourhood planning (Stanton, 2014). These authorities designate areas as neighbourhood areas and organisations as neighbourhood forums. To be designated as the latter, organisations must meet criteria specified in legislation. For example, they must have a written constitution and comprise 21 members. Local planning authorities arrange and fund the aforementioned independent examination and local referendum, they are required to assist (not financially) communities pursuing plans and they adopt plans that succeed in a referendum. They also prepare the local strategic policy to which neighbourhood plans must conform. In preparing this they are required to assemble adequate, relevant and up-to-date evidence (DCLG, 2012b). Communities preparing neighbourhood plans are encouraged to refer to this evidence (DCLG, 2012a). Such privileging of the local authority as a site of knowledge production, and of top-down expertise, might seem to conflict with collaborative planning's interest in taking into account, and treating with equal respect, all types of knowledge (Brand and Gaffikin, 2007).

## **Participation in neighbourhood planning: emerging evidence**

In early 2015, the DCLG (2015a) estimated that approximately 1,400 areas were developing neighbourhood plans with 6.1 million people, or approximately 12% of the population, living in a designated neighbourhood area; although less than 1% lived in an area with a plan that had passed a referendum (DCLG, 2015a). By November 2015 the DCLG (2015b) reported that the number had risen to some 1,650 areas, home to over 8 million people, whilst around 80 plans had been adopted.

Looking across communities, Ludwig and Ludwig (2014, page 251) have commented on the “patchy and sporadic” geography of neighbourhood planning. Supporting such assertions, in August 2015, data collated by the information and news source ‘Planning Resource’ (2015) indicated that just over 40% of local planning authorities had not designated any neighbourhood areas; in fact in around a third of authorities there had been no applications from areas seeking this status. Conversely, 8% had designated 10 or more areas and a further 3% had designated 20 or more.

Early evidence suggests that neighbourhood planning has been concentrated in the South, particularly the South East, and in rural areas (Turley, 2014). Further, areas pursuing plans have tended to be civil parishes (DCLG, 2012a; Turley, 2014) and relatively small (Turley, 2014). In early 2015, Kingston, a civil parish on the South Coast, with an estimated population of 625, was identified as the smallest place with a plan that had passed a referendum whilst Winsford, a civil parish in Cheshire with an estimated population of 31,000, was identified as the largest (DCLG, 2015a).

Relative to deprived areas, less deprived areas have been more likely to be designated as neighbourhood areas and to have applied for this status (Vigar et al., 2012; Geoghan, 2013; Turley, 2014) whilst, at the local authority level, less deprived authorities have seen higher levels of interest, a better conversion rate of neighbourhood area applications to designations and a greater number of adopted plans. Based on data collated by Planning Resource (2015), in August 2015, the 10% least deprived authorities (using the rank of average rank measure in the English Indices of Deprivation 2015 (DCLG, 2015c)) had collectively received applications from 172 communities, made 155 designations and adopted 10 plans. Across the 10% most deprived authorities, the corresponding figures were 46 applications, 26 designations and 2 adopted plans.

Communities seeking to limit development have been active in neighbourhood planning. An analysis of the first 75 published plans revealed that around 55% had “protectionist” agendas with many being “openly anti-development” (Turley, 2014, page 26). Plans in rural areas appeared most likely to promote these concerns (Turley, 2014).

Within communities, anecdotal evidence suggests that relatively small groups of people, fewer than 12, are progressing plans with a larger number participating at key junctures (Vigar, 2013). At the crucial referendum stage participation rates appear relatively low with average voter turnout in the first 100 totalling some 34% (DCLG, 2015b) - a figure admittedly in line with voter turnout at recent Local Elections (Rallings and Thrasher, 2014). Participants appear to be the ‘familiar faces’ exhibiting the type of demographic characteristics typically associated with participation in planning (Vigar, 2013; Davoudi and Cowie, 2013). Indeed, Davoudi and Cowie (2013, page 565) commented that, in early 2013, neighbourhood forums had “failed to expand the diversity of political representation” in the

planning process. Such findings might suggest that the early practice of neighbourhood planning has struggled to achieve collaborative planning's aim of opening up participation, "according voice, ear and respect to all those with an interest in the issues at stake" (Healey, 1992, page 155), and ensuring that all participants 'have equal ability to put over their views' (Healey, 1996, page 224). Given the right 'communicative contexts' (Healey, 1996), the collaborative approach assumes these aims are achievable noting that we are all "deeply skilled in communicative practices for listening, learning and understanding each other" (Healey, 1996, page 219). These contexts require the 'right' conditions (e.g. the right style, routine and language of collective discourse, a focus on consensus-building), the 'right' processes (e.g. appropriate processes to "prevent those who are 'not present' from being 'absent' from the discussion" (Healey, 2006, page 275)) and the 'right' arenas (e.g. arenas informed by an 'inclusionary ethic' (Healey, 2006)).

## **Case study and methodology**

Positioned as an exploratory study (Babbie, 2010), the research was designed to afford rich, detailed insights into participation in neighbourhood planning, and the experience and implementation of the new regime within communities. The research comprised a collective case study (Stake, 1995) operating at two levels of analysis. One level looked at neighbourhood planning across the city of Leeds whilst the second drilled down to examine neighbourhood planning within three designated neighbourhood areas within that city.

### *Cases*

Selecting Leeds provided an opportunity to explore the implementation of neighbourhood planning in a large metropolitan area (Leeds is the second largest metropolitan district in England) experiencing comparatively high levels of interest in the new initiative (Crabtree and Mackay, 2013). Thirteen communities had been designated as neighbourhood areas and a further four had formally applied for this status at the time of the study, which was conducted between October 2012 and March 2013. There was opportunity, then, to examine and compare experiences across many areas, with much of the research focusing on these 17 locations. In addition, government appointed support providers, organisations tasked with providing support, training, technical assistance and small grants, up to £8,000 at the time of writing, to communities preparing plans (Locality, 2015), were active within the city, whilst the city council had adopted a self-confessed ‘proactive’ approach to the new regime (Crabtree and Harwood, 2011).

A small neighbourhood planning team had been established within the council’s planning department to offer direct support to communities. Draft guidance on neighbourhood planning had been prepared. Neighbourhood planning events had been organised for interested communities and others. Four diverse communities had been submitted for inclusion in the government’s ‘Front Runners’ scheme, where communities were chosen to pilot neighbourhood planning. Officers reported that participation represented a useful learning exercise affording insights into “what neighbourhood plans can achieve, the time and costs involved and the level of support the council will provide” (Crabtree and Harwood, 2011: Para 5.2).

Explaining this proactive approach, officers suggested that involvement in neighbourhood planning provided opportunities to develop good relationships with

communities. Further, involvement was thought able to build capacity and inform the production of strategic planning policy whilst there were concerns about judicial reviews and referendums against specific developments if the council failed to engage with communities on land owning interests (Crabtree and Harwood, 2011). High levels of local interest in the new regime, plus concerns about the effect on council resources if a defined ‘offer’ to communities was absent, formed further prompts (Crabtree and Harwood, 2011). On this latter point, in a report to the council’s Executive Board, officers commented:

*“If we do not develop an overall approach and ‘offer’ to respond to neighbourhood planning council resources may become focused on supporting and advising the outer more affluent areas of the city that have, or are able to, bring in resources and expertise in their local area. This may leave other areas behind and make them more vulnerable to developers and consultants who may not have their best interests at heart”* (Crabtree and Harwood, 2011: Para. 4.6.2)

The three case study areas (A, B and C) were selected from amongst the 13 areas that had been designated as neighbourhood areas at the time of the study. With this crucial step achieved, it was assumed these locations would offer activities, structures and processes to observe. Given this focus, the research is less able to comment on neighbourhood planning at more embryonic stages.

Areas B and C were selected principally as examples of the ‘typical’ type of community pursuing a neighbourhood plan at the time of the study. They were small, rural / semi-rural, less deprived, civil parishes. It was thought interesting to explore the structures and processes present within this ‘common’ kind of neighbourhood area. Area A was selected

to provide a contrast of sorts. If common practices and structures were found across differing cases it was assumed these might reflect core, shared neighbourhood planning practices and structures within communities (Patton, 2002). Similarities in the cases available (see later), interest in taking part, and the study timeframe, informed the number and diversity of cases selected. Area A, although a civil parish in a semi-rural setting, was significantly larger, and notably less affluent than Areas B and C. Unlike these communities, no part of Area A had Conservation Area status (Conservation Areas are designated for their special architectural and historic interest) whilst it hosted a larger (although still modest) range of amenities, including a small high street.

Across the three areas, though varied, there were commonalities in locally identified planning concerns articulated in previous community planning exercises (e.g. village design statements, parish plans). These included a concern to improve existing amenities, conserve the local built heritage and halt settlement expansion into the surrounding countryside through further development. In the city's strategic planning policy, Area A was classed as a 'smaller settlement' in the Settlement Hierarchy, developed to guide future development opportunities (Leeds City Council, 2014a), whilst, on a lower rung, Areas B and C were classed as 'villages'.

All three areas were pursuing Neighbourhood Development Plans. Across Leeds planning officers reported that community interest was focused on the production of plans rather than development orders. The areas became involved in neighbourhood planning at a similar time with each gaining neighbourhood area status in September 2012. Their planning activities began, then, before it became possible for areas with plans to retain CIL funds but

after the introduction of the New Homes Bonus. Table 1 provides selected demographic data for Leeds and the three case study areas.

### *Methods*

A variety of methods were employed, and data collected, to develop a detailed understanding of the particularity and complexity of the selected cases (Stake, 1995). To explore the experiences and perspectives of the diversity of actors involved in neighbourhood planning, semi-structured in-depth interviews ( $n = 12$ ) were completed with a collection of relevant stakeholders (Table 2). Interviews explored the scale and characteristics of participation in neighbourhood planning, the support available to areas pursuing plans, barriers to plan-making, the policy context, the resources involved in developing a plan and the plan-making structures and processes operating within areas.

Unstructured non-participant observation (Bryman, 2012) was used to observe a series of ‘real-world’ public neighbourhood planning events within the three case study areas. Meetings, training sessions and consultation events were observed. Comprehensive field notes, providing a simple running record of all that happened over the course of the observation, were compiled (Bryman, 2012).

Neighbourhood planning documents produced by these three areas, plus other communities within Leeds pursuing neighbourhood plans, Leeds City Council, government and the government appointed support providers, were collated through extensive desktop research for analysis (Simons, 2009). Documents included websites, project plans, leaflets



and flyers, newsletters, meeting minutes and agendas, community questionnaires, reports, guidance, policy, and neighbourhood area and forum applications (Plummer, 2001).

An inductive thematic analysis was carried out on the collected qualitative data (Joffe and Yardley, 2004). This was completed by repeatedly reviewing, comparing and moving back and forth between the different data sets. Key themes identified through this process included organisation, resources, networks, activities, planning concerns/interests and support. For each theme a set of detailed notes were prepared. These notes captured pertinent information and quotes abstracted from the different data sets. Here, attention focuses on themes pertinent to the issue of participation; specifically, the scale and nature of participation and barriers to participation.

To explore, at the level of the individual, the characteristics of those who were participating in neighbourhood planning, the individuals most active in developing the neighbourhood plans in the three case study areas were surveyed. To encourage participation, the survey was designed to take 5 minutes to complete. It collected information on a handful of characteristics which have been associated with participation and, specifically, participation in planning - age, gender, tenure, past planning experience, previous participation experience and length of residence (Dear, 1992, Siranni, 2007, Middleton et al., 2000, Carr, 2012, Tewdwr-Jones and Thomas, 1998, Carpenter and Brownill, 2008, Albrechts, 2002). Across the three areas, 23 completed surveys were returned. This represented most of the individuals who were consistently active in the neighbourhood planning projects within the three communities (see later). All persons who attended a randomly selected public meeting in Areas A and C were invited to complete a survey, all did. Eight surveys were returned in Area A and 10 in Area C. All members of the 8 person

‘drafting committee’ in Area B (see later) were invited to complete a survey, five did. Three members were not present at the meeting in which the surveys were distributed. Simple descriptive statistics were developed from the collected data

Lastly, to map the characteristics of the areas participating in neighbourhood planning, data from the 2011 Census (ONS, [n.d]) were collated for the 17 communities designated or applying to be designated as neighbourhood areas at the time of the study. Simple descriptive statistics were developed from the data (Table 1). With the methods described attention now turns to the research findings.

### **Participation across communities**

Around 81,000 persons, approximately 11% of the city’s population, lived within the 17 areas in Leeds that had been designated, or had formally applied to be designated, as neighbourhood areas at the time of the study. The areas resembled one another on a number of measures suggesting that participation was concentrated amongst certain kinds of community. Reflecting the national picture, all but one was a civil parish - almost half the civil parishes in Leeds were developing plans at the time of the study – whilst all were located on the urban-rural fringe. All but one included within their boundaries Conservation Areas. Similarly, all but one had previously engaged in some form of community planning exercise. Areas had produced parish plans, design guides and/or design statements. Reflecting the national picture, most areas were relatively small, with nine featuring populations of fewer than 2,000 persons. However, three hosted populations of over 10,000 with the largest, a small market town, being home to some 19,000 people.

The demographic profiles of the 17 areas (see Table 1) reflected, on many measures including tenure, age, educational attainment and affluence, the demographic profile of the ‘typical’ planning participant (Dear, 1992, Tewdwr-Jones and Thomas, 1998; Carr, 2012, Albrechts, 2002). All areas featured high levels of homeownership with over three quarters of households identified as owner occupiers in 12 areas. All contained relatively large proportions of older adults. In seven areas around a third of the population was aged 60 years or over. In 14 areas over a third of residents held a Level 4 or above qualification, a category that includes degrees and higher degrees. None of the 17 areas were particularly deprived, although Area A was relatively deprived in parts (a factor which, as discussed, partly explained its selection as a case study). In fact, resembling the national picture, many areas were affluent or relatively affluent. In 13 areas over a third of the dwelling stock fell into the top four Council Tax Bands (Bands E, F, G and H), whilst in four over a third fell into the top two bands, suggesting substantial property prices and housing wealth. In eight areas, 50% or more of residents classified within the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification system worked in typically well-paid occupations; in higher and lower managerial, administrative and professional occupations.

### **Participation within communities**

A relatively small number of individuals, often fewer than 10, comprising a mix of parish councillors and local residents, in self-organised, self-defined groups, drove the neighbourhood plans forward in the three case study areas. Discrete though dependent entities, these groups acted on behalf of, and indeed gained their authority, legitimacy and frequently their resources from, the local parish council. These group members might be identified as an area’s *core neighbourhood planners*.

In Area A, an eight person 'core committee', linked to the parish council, steered the plan. Four or five individuals initiated work on discrete tasks, often working independently, and presented preliminary outputs for discussion in monthly public meetings attended by the committee. In Area B, an eight person 'drafting committee', linked to the parish council, worked on the plan and then presented decisions to a large 'steering group' for ratification. Membership of the steering group was open to anyone who wished to attend the (usually) monthly public meetings with turnout, during the study, ranging from between 30 to 45 people. In Area C, a 21 person 'steering group', linked to the parish council, had been established although activities tended to be completed by just six or seven members. In Areas A and C individuals spoke about work 'falling' on a small number of people with concern expressed about this proving draining and taxing. In Area A, highlighting the importance of the handful of individuals that championed the plan, work had stalled for a period because those promoting it had had to attend to other commitments.

Across the three areas there were many similarities between the core neighbourhood planners. All were homeowners, most were male (approximately 70%) and most were aged 59 years and over (approximately 70%). Most were established residents - almost 75% had lived in the local area for 11 or more years. The majority (65%) participated in other voluntary or community group activities and most had some experience of participating in the planning system (74%); they had commented on planning applications, contributed to the preparation of a parish plan etc. These individuals shared a keen interest in minimising the scale and impact of new development, although they appreciated that neighbourhood plans could not be a bar to all development.

On the subject of development, at the time of the study the city council was in the process of conducting a Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA), a technical exercise that assesses the amount of land which could be made available for housing development. Numerous sites put forward and/or identified for consideration in this exercise were located in and around the 17 areas pursuing plans, including the three case study areas. The SHLAA had a galvanising effect on communities. Reacting to a perceived threat (Saunders, 1990, Russell et al., 2005, Short et al, 1986), concerned residents, anxious about the prospect of development in their locality, came together and identified the construction of a neighbourhood plan as an opportunity to influence this exercise. This was certainly the case in Areas B and C. In Area A, where the council seemed critical in the decision to develop a plan identifying its construction as a valuable learning experience, only after plan preparation work began did individuals learn of the SHLAA. However, once understood it was frequently mentioned in meetings with concerns expressed about the probable negative impact on the community of developing certain SHLAA sites. The core neighbourhood planners in all three areas participated in the SHLAA process carrying out assessments of local SHLAA sites and submitting these to the council. The council encouraged groups in this by producing a site assessment form and associated guidance (Leeds City Council, 2013).

Reflecting aspects of the national picture, anxieties about development were evident across the 17 designated neighbourhood areas and areas applying for this status. Further, in these areas neighbourhood plans were identified as an important tool for shaping development. In one it was reported that failure to produce a plan would render a community “completely open to rife development without any effective cognisance of the community’s concerns” (Bardsley cum Rigton, [n.d]) whilst in another an early draft plan commented “if a

community does not have a Neighbourhood Plan it becomes easy prey for speculative development over which it would have very little say” (Walton Parish Council, 2012, page 4). Reviewing initial interest in neighbourhood planning, the council reported that some expressions of interest demonstrated an ‘anti-growth’ agenda (Crabtree and Harwood, 2011). Perhaps reflecting such concerns, as noted earlier, areas were typically developing Neighbourhood Development Plans rather than Neighbourhood Development Orders, the latter being a perhaps more avowedly pro-development tool.

The core neighbourhood planners in the three case study areas were keen to open up participation in the plan-making process to a wider range of interests. To encourage involvement they used websites, social and local media, public meetings and meetings with individual stakeholders, leaflet drops, information stands, community surveys and consultation exercises. In Area C, individuals often voiced concerns about the need to be able to effectively demonstrate to the independent examiner that all parts of the community had been engaged. Such concerns prompted a brainstorming session where possible methods to encourage participation were explored. Despite such efforts, particularly in Areas A and C, widening participation seemed difficult. Core neighbourhood planners in Area C discussed low use of their website and challenges around involving young people, whilst public meetings of the neighbourhood plan steering group rarely attracted members of the public. Area A noted that participation rates had dropped since the initial public meetings. Areas A and C reported difficulties, although did not elaborate on these, in engaging with local businesses and landowners. This did not appear to be a problem in Area B where members of the drafting committee secured multiple meetings with local businesses.

To engage the wider community, surveys had been developed and distributed in Areas B and C. Both areas achieved a good response rate of around 50% - a substantially higher rate than that achieved in certain other areas pursuing plans. For example, Barwick in Elmet and Scholes achieved a response rate of 23% (Barwick-in-Elmet & Scholes Neighbourhood Development Plan, 2012) whilst there were approximately 70 responses to a survey in the civil parish of Bardsley cum Rigton suggesting that just 7% of households in the parish took part (Bardsey Neighbourhood Plan Steering Committee, 2012). In Areas B and C respondents tended to be older adults (an outcome no doubt influenced by local demographics). In Area B, for instance, 50% of respondents were aged 55 years or over. The area's core neighbourhood planners noted that this placed their survey findings in a 'particular context'. Engaging with a public rarely courted in planning exercises (Frank, 2006), a separate young persons' survey for the under 18s was developed in Area B. This received around 26 responses. At the time of the study the core neighbourhood planners in Area A were just starting to design a survey. Ultimately, this survey received around 300 responses suggesting that around 7% of households within the parish took part. Local businesses were also contacted with approximately 40% of those contacted responding.

### **Barriers to participation**

Strong similarities amongst the people and places participating in neighbourhood planning might suggest that the new regime only appealed to a select 'type' of individual and area. Alternatively, it might suggest, and indeed evidence indicated, that individuals and areas differing from this 'type' struggled to participate. These individuals and locations seemed to encounter 'barriers' to participation with regime design and access to resources appearing to be critical.

### *Regime design*

The design of neighbourhood planning appeared to create a more difficult pathway to participation for non-parished areas relative to parished areas. With parishes tending to be a mostly rural phenomena (Jones, 2007, page 231), the regime seemed better suited, then, to facilitating the participation of rural areas relative to urban areas.

Evidence from Leeds suggested that in non-parished areas the crucial tasks of defining the neighbourhood area and establishing a neighbourhood forum proved challenging. Holbeck, a non-parished inner urban area selected by government as a 'Front Runner' community in March 2012, following an application by the council, only gained neighbourhood area status in October 2013, after the study closed, whilst a neighbourhood forum was not established until March 2014 (Holbeck Neighbourhood Forum, 2014). Securing the participation of the 21 individuals required to form the neighbourhood forum proved difficult, likewise the task of identifying and agreeing upon a neighbourhood area boundary. Reflecting on the 16 parishes within Leeds that had been designated or were applying to be designated as neighbourhood areas at the time of the study, in most cases the established parish boundary had been adopted as the extent of the neighbourhood area. Further, across these areas, plans were usually progressed by relatively small, self-organised groups. In fact, in only one area did the entire parish council consist of more than 21 councillors.

Amongst community activists in three areas, all urban and non-parished, considering the desirability of developing a plan, concerns about the potential scope of neighbourhood



plans tempered interest. With their possible content tightly framed by policy and legislation, plans were thought unable to address key issues of local concern. Reservations about the weight attached to neighbourhood plans in planning decisions, and the perceived time and effort associated with developing a plan, further contained their appeal. However, perhaps indicating that such reservations can be set aside, two of these areas began to develop neighbourhood plans after the study had closed.

### *Resources*

Resources particular to parished areas seemed to advantage these locations over non-parished areas in neighbourhood planning. Existing platforms, such as parish council meetings, websites and newsletters, were used to promote and encourage participation. A council clerk was sometimes available to assist with administrative tasks. Of particular importance, through the precept, a tax which may be charged on each domestic property within a parish to fund parish council works (Sandford, 2015), there was potential access to an ongoing, independent funding stream. In Areas B and C the parish council had provided funds to support plan-making activities. At the time of the study the situation in Area A was less clear. In Area C the parish council had financed the community survey whilst in Area B parish council funds had been used to purchase stationary and hire rooms for meetings. In Area B, funds also came from an active fundraising committee set up to support the plan and a grant from a local amenity society. Reflecting on financing the plan, a core neighbourhood planner in Area B noted, “we won’t be short of money, this is a very wealthy community”.

Amongst and within communities, skilled, knowledgeable individuals seemed readily able to participate in the new regime, and served to aid an area’s participation. Professionals

and retired professionals from various fields, including business, project management, health and IT, numbered amongst the core neighbourhood planners in Areas B and C. These individuals lent their skills and experience to the planning effort building websites, designing and analysing community surveys, securing meetings with local businesses, handling formal communications with the council and project managing progression of the plan. In Area B, the involvement of a particular business meant their community survey had been printed free-of-charge. Within these areas, the ability to draw upon this rich, talented network (Hillier, 2000) meant there had been no real need to contract out work or 'buy in' support. Only Area B had purchased an external service, hiring consultants to complete a traffic survey. Planning activities within both areas had progressed relatively quickly, independently and with a degree of confidence. The situation in Area A was quite different. Here, the core neighbourhood planners turned to one of the government appointed support providers and local authority planners for training, advice and ongoing support. These individuals reported limited knowledge of neighbourhood planning and seemed to lack confidence in their abilities to start and progress a plan without outside assistance. Relative to Areas B and C, progress in Area A was much slower and incorporated episodes of training and 'capacity building'. In training sessions, the support provider outlined a series of steps, informed by particular conceptualisations of 'good' planning, that communities could take to develop a plan. Tools and techniques to address each step were outlined. This approach appeared to inform the shape and pace of neighbourhood planning within the area.

### **Postscript: Neighbourhood planning in Leeds in 2015**

There has been much growth in neighbourhood planning in Leeds since the time of the study, although participation and progress still seem to be concentrated amongst the

‘familiar faces’. In August 2015, a small, affluent civil parish on the urban-rural fringe produced the city’s first neighbourhood plan to reach the independent examination stage. Following a number of modifications, the examiner recommended that the plan proceed to a referendum. By early September 2015, 33 communities in the city had been designated as neighbourhood areas (up from 13 at the time of the study). Approximately 70% of these were civil parishes (around 70% of the civil parishes in Leeds had been designated as neighbourhood areas in 2015). Many of these parishes were relatively affluent areas located on the urban-rural fringe. Eleven of the designated areas related, however, to non-parished urban areas. These were a combination of relatively affluent outer suburbs, deprived inner urban areas and mixed income inner and outer urban areas. Consequently, although taking time to establish, four years after its introduction neighbourhood planning appears to be expanding into increasingly diverse locations within Leeds. Steps taken by the city council seem to be supporting this process. Neighbourhood planning advice for non-parished areas has been produced. A combined neighbourhood area and neighbourhood forum application form has been developed to simplify the process of applying for these designations. A Neighbourhood Planning Agreement has been prepared for all neighbourhood forums “to agree opportunities for support arrangements” (Leeds City Council, 2014b, page 4). Longer timeframes and targeted support seem critical, then, to opening-out sub-local participatory planning projects to a diversity of interests and communities.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The presented case study findings suggest that, similar to many past experiments in sub-local participatory planning, rather than encouraging involvement from a wider range of people as the Minister claimed, and the collaborative approach both promotes and presumes,

neighbourhood planning has tended to encourage involvement from the kind of 'familiar faces' - individuals and areas - that traditionally participate in planning decisions (Bailey and Pill, 2015; Vigar, 2013; Brand and Giffikin, 2007). Further, these individuals and areas have been best able to develop plans relatively quickly, independently and with a degree of confidence. Participation appears to have been more problematic for areas and individuals with limited resources. Plus, due to the particular design of the new regime, compared to parished areas, participation appears to have been more difficult for non-parished areas. Indeed, engagement in neighbourhood planning has been lower amongst both non-parished areas and more deprived areas. Whilst the dynamics of participation have evolved since the time of the study, interest and progress in the regime still seem to be concentrated amongst the 'familiar faces' and parished areas.

Reflecting on the relationship between neighbourhood planning and collaborative planning, a key concern of this article, such findings might suggest that the arenas, processes and conditions of the former struggled to address core aims of the latter (Healey, 2006). Further, they indicate that entrenched differences between people and places influenced participation (Carpenter and Brownill, 2008), and, importantly, they underline the challenges associated with designing arenas, conditions and processes that minimise the impact of such differences. If the settings and processes needed to achieve the aims of collaborative planning prove, however, too difficult to realise (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998) they will invariably remain elusive to any participatory planning exercise, sub-local or otherwise. Anchored by the critical issue of participation, the account of neighbourhood planning presented here identified connections to collaborative planning in places but also numerous conflicts. Advocates of the collaborative approach may well identify such rifts as the reason for the regime's apparent difficulties in opening out participation. However, findings from

three case study areas suggest that even when this approach was approximated participation could still be low and selective, as evidenced in Area A. Importantly, the identified discrepancies between the collaborative approach and neighbourhood planning underline the challenges involved in translating the former into practice, of implementing the hard and soft infrastructure necessary for the collaborative approach to be realised (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998, Allmendinger, 1991; Healey, 1996, 2006).

On the crucial issue of development, with raised building rates being key to the government's case for neighbourhood planning, across numerous communities pursuing plans anxieties about new development were evident. Such findings suggest that devolving power to communities, and the provision of economic 'incentives', might not lead to the pro-growth sentiments anticipated by the Conservatives (2010). Additionally, or alternatively, they might suggest that the communities most motivated to take advantage of devolved powers may not be the kind to hold or develop such sentiments, and/or be motivated by the prospect of shared economic gains.

In reflecting on the findings, several issues should be borne in mind. First, the study focused on a single city and, consequently, findings reflect the dynamics of neighbourhood planning within that location. Experiences elsewhere might differ, particularly perhaps in very rural, sparsely populated areas where numerous plans have come forward (Turley, 2014). Second, the study examined neighbourhood planning in its early infancy. Follow-up research could explore if/how participation dynamics have changed over time. Third, the study provided a snapshot of neighbourhood planning over a six month period. Future research could take a longer view, perhaps following the progress of a plan or plans from

inception through to adoption with issues such as the scale and nature of participation examined.

**Table 1: Demographic data for areas pursuing neighbourhood plans**

		Area A	Area B	Area C	17 designated neighbourhood areas and areas applying for this status: Median values	Leeds	England
Total population	Persons	9,785	661	1,849	1,756	751,485	53,012,456
Age 0 to19	Persons	23%	23%	22%	22%	24%	24%
Age 20 to 29	Persons	10%	5%	6%	7%	18%	14%
Age 30 to 44	Persons	21%	19%	18%	19%	21%	21%
Age 45 to 59	Persons	21%	23%	23%	22%	18%	19%
Aged 60 and over	Persons	25%	30%	31%	29%	20%	22%
1. Higher and Lower Managerial, Administrative and Professional Occupations	Persons	30%	63%	57%	49%	34%	34%
2. Intermediate Occupations	Persons	17%	11%	13%	13%	13%	13%
3. Small Employers & Own Account Workers	Persons	9%	13%	12%	12%	9%	10%
4. Lower Supervisory and Technical Occupations	Persons	10%	1%	3%	5%	7%	8%
5. Semi-routine and routine occupations	Persons	30%	9%	11%	17%	28%	28%
8. Never Worked and Long-Term Unemployed	Persons	3%	2%	2%	2%	7%	6%
Council Tax Bottom 2 Bands (A & B)	Households	58%	1%	5%	21%	61%	44%
Council Tax Top 2 Bands (G & H)	Households	0%	74%	23%	12%	2%	4%
Owner-occupiers	Households	81%	93%	92%	81%	60%	65%
Social rented	Households	13%	2%	1%	9%	22%	18%
Private rented	Households	6%	6%	6%	9%	18%	17%
No Qualifications	Persons	26%	11%	13%	16%	23%	22%
Highest Qualification - Level 4 Qualifications and above	Persons	19%	50%	46%	40%	27%	27%

Source: Office for National Statistics. Notes: Due to rounding may not always sum to 100%.

**Table 2: Interviewees**

<b>Interviewee</b>
Core neighbourhood planner in Area A
Core neighbourhood planner in Area B
Core neighbourhood planner in Area C
2 x local government planning officers
Local government officer with particular links to Area B
Local Elected Member with city-wide responsibilities that include neighbourhood planning
Planning consultant and resident of an area in Leeds developing a neighbourhood plan
3 x community group members in areas considering the merits of developing neighbourhood plans
Planning consultant linked to a government appointed support provider supporting areas across Leeds (and elsewhere)



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